

GREAT AGES OF MAN  
*A History of the World's Cultures*

# HISTORIC INDIA

by  
LUCILLE SCHULBERG  
and  
The Editors of TIME-LIFE BOOKS

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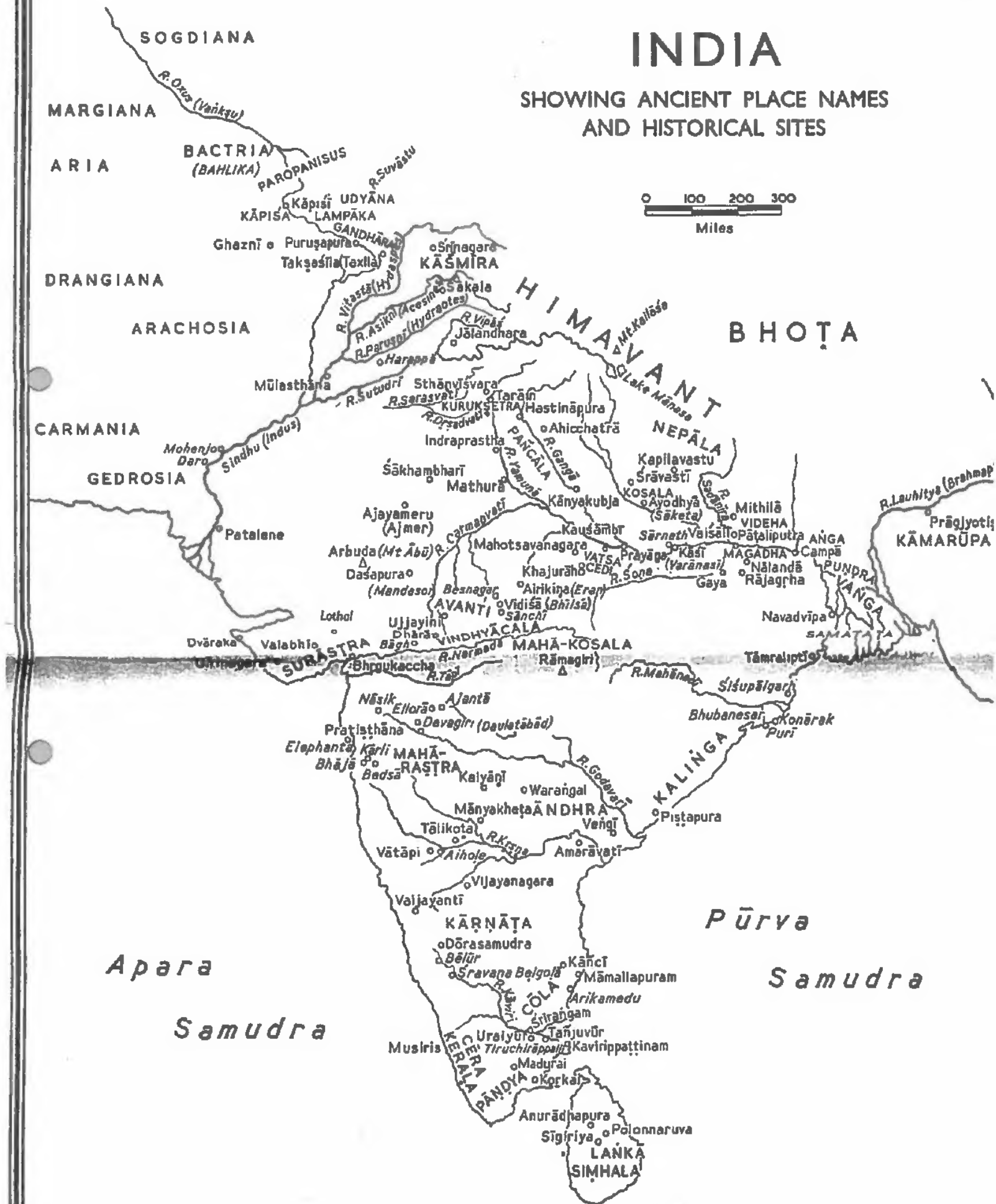
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# INDIA

SHOWING ANCIENT PLACE NAMES  
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# 2

## THE ROOTS OF INDIAN CULTURE

In Western history, a thousand years is a long time. The rise, decline and fall of the Roman Empire all took place within that span of time; ancient Greece rose and fell in less than half of it. But it took a full millennium—the years between about 1500 and about 500 B.C.—merely to lay the foundations of Hinduism. During those centuries, nomadic tribes from Central Asia overran the northern part of the Indian subcontinent. Borrowing from older cultures already on the land, they developed and enriched their own social and religious ideas. Though modified by reforms and evolutionary changes, these social and religious ideas still prevail in India: for modern Hindus, all the fundamental principles of society and religion were laid down in that first thousand years.

For nearly 2,000 years afterward, the period from 1500 to 500 B.C. was generally taken as the beginning of Indian history, for only in recent decades have men been able to peer further back into the Indian past. In some respects, recent discoveries leave the general picture unchanged; the birth of Hinduism is still the crucial starting point of historic India. But some of these discoveries are important and exciting for their own sake. They have extended our knowledge of Indian history by thousands of years, and they have turned up at least one great pre-Hindu civilization.

Archeologists and anthropologists now know that the beginnings of civilization in India are nearly as old as civilization itself. About 4000 B.C., soon after the appearance of farming communities in Mesopotamia, men in the northwest corner of India, made the great transition from nomadic hunting and food-gathering to agriculture. West of the Indus River, on the hills of Baluchistan and the rim of the Iranian plateau, such men began to settle on the land. By 3000 B.C. they had developed a primitive village culture—a culture of farmers who lived in mud-and-wattle huts, and practiced the animistic worship of natural objects and forces.

Then, in a great and still-unexplained advance, these people developed one of the earliest of the world's great civilizations. Because the centers of this civilization were first found along the Indus River, some archeologists call it the Indus Valley civilization; others call it the Harappan Culture,

*Maurycus*

A PROUD-VISAGED FIGURINE, found in the ruins of Mohenjo Daro, is one of the few stone sculptures left from this once-thriving city. Archeologists think the figure, perhaps representing a priest, was used at a family altar.

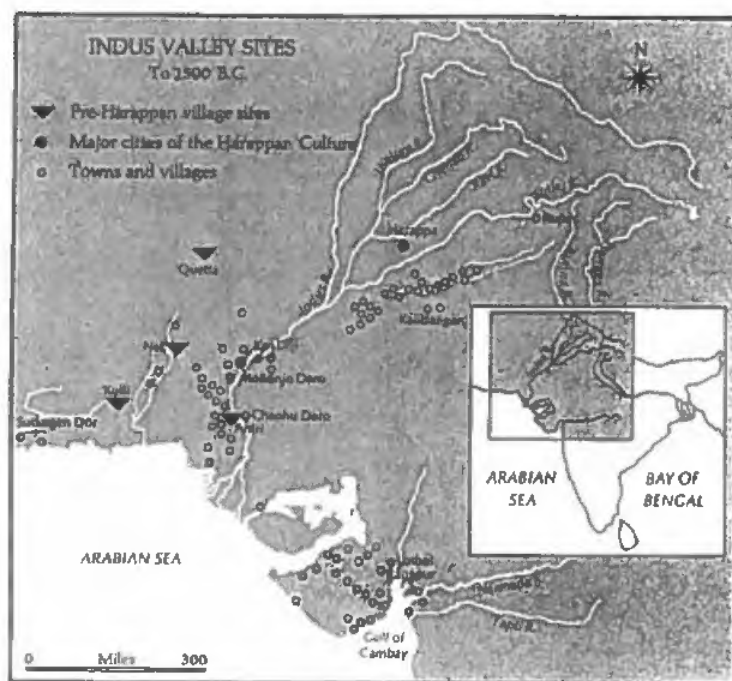
PRE-HINDU CIVILIZATION first developed in northwestern India, where agricultural villages grew up in the Indus Valley region about 4000 B.C. These villages preceded the more advanced Harappan Culture, which flourished from about 2500 to 1500 B.C.

after one of its two capital cities. Whatever its name, it flourished mightily for a thousand years, from about 2500 to about 1500 B.C., and then mysteriously disappeared.

The discovery of the Harappan, or Indus Valley, civilization is one of the triumphs of modern archeology. Not until 1922, when an archeologist digging in what is now West Pakistan turned up a handful of bricks and stone seals, did anyone even guess at the civilization's existence. Since then hardly a year has passed without a significant find and an increase of knowledge, and the hunt for Harappan sites and artifacts is still underway. The story is still fragmentary, and important gaps remain to be filled. But the explorers have proved conclusively that the civilization was a great one, ranking with the other great river civilizations of its time—that of Egypt on the Nile, and of Sumer on the Tigris and Euphrates.

It was great, to begin with, in the sheer size of the territory it dominated—an extent of land far greater than that of Egypt or Sumer. The Harappan world covered a gigantic triangle with sides a thousand miles long. The apex of the triangle lay far up the Indus River system, or perhaps as far as the Ganges; its base extended along the coast from the head of the Arabian Sea, at the modern Iran-Pakistan border, to the Gulf of Cambay, near modern Bombay. Within this vast area archeologists have already found over 50 communities, ranging from farming towns and villages through large seaports to the two great capitals of the civilization—Mohenjo Daro, on the central Indus River, and Harappa, on a tributary about 400 miles to the northeast.

The diversity of these communities reflects the diversity of the Indus economy. To the farming communities came the produce of the countryside—wheat, barley, a variety of fruits and the earliest cultivated cotton in the world. The seaports were



magnificently equipped: the port of Lothal, on the Gulf of Cambay, contained an enclosed brick shipping dock over 700 feet long, controlled by a sluice gate and capable of loading ships at low and high tides. At such ports, Harappan traders dealt in gold and copper, turquoise and lapis lazuli, timber from the slopes of the Himalayas. Harappan ships sailed up the Persian Gulf to Mesopotamia, carrying Indian ivory and cotton to the age-old cities of Agade and Ur in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley. And all the wealth of farming, trading and shipping contributed to the wealth of the two capitals, the cities of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa.

Both capitals were masterpieces of urban planning. Each consisted essentially of a rectangle three miles in circumference, dominated by a fortified citadel as high as a modern five-story building. The citadel, containing a huge granary, a hall for ceremonial assemblies, and a public—perhaps ritualistic—bath, was apparently the center of government and religion. Below it, the city spread out in a rigidly mathematical gridiron pattern, with avenues and streets running north and south, east and west. Solidly built brick houses, shops and restaurants lined the streets, with windowless walls facing the streets themselves, entrances on narrow lanes behind the streets, and rooms graciously arranged around open interior courtyards. Even the sanitary



arrangements in these buildings—the most elaborate in the world of that time—bespeak the sophistication of the Indus technology. Indoor baths and privies were connected by a system of drains and water chutes to sewers running beneath the main streets. At intervals, there were openings in the drains for the convenience of official inspectors. As the British archeologist Sir Mortimer Wheeler puts it, the planning and sanitary arrangements of the cities present a picture of “middle-class prosperity with zealous municipal controls.”

In the arts, the people of these thriving cities excelled in brilliantly decorated wheel-turned pottery and small, beautifully executed figurines. There are pieces in terra cotta and glazed ceramic that apparently represent a “mother goddess,” a seated male divinity, and a sacred bull and pipal tree. There are secular and even playful pieces, too: comic grotesques and caricatures; a coquettish bronze figure of a dancing girl, caught in mid-wiggle; and charming terra cotta toys—animals with jiggling heads, tiny ox carts pulled by strings.

As befitted a generally commercial culture, however, the richest store of Indus artifacts was apparently assembled by the merchant class, and for commercial ends. This store consists of soapstone seals, usually about an inch square, and probably designed to identify bales of cotton or bags of grain. Over a thousand such seals have been found at Mohenjo Daro alone; others have turned up as far away as the Persian Gulf and the cities of Mesopotamia. They provide at once an esthete's delight and an archeologist's puzzle. A delight, because they are exquisitely carved with figures of bulls, elephants, tigers, antelopes and other animal residents of the Indus Valley. A puzzle, because they almost invariably bear inscriptions in a delicate pictographic style—inscriptions that have obstinately defied all attempts at decipherment.

Because the seal inscriptions provide nearly all

the surviving examples of Indus writing, they have been the objects of intense study. About 250 different pictographs have been identified—pictographs that are as different from Egyptian hieroglyphics and Mesopotamian cuneiform as these two ancient scripts are from each other—but the longest single inscription contains only 17 of these pictographic symbols. Lacking a key to the meanings of individual symbols, scientists can only speculate on this most tantalizing of all clues to the secrets of a civilization.

The seals are also part of another, larger puzzle: the disappearance of the Indus Valley civilization after about 1500 B.C. Toward the end of the thousand-year span of that civilization, the quality of the seals at Mohenjo Daro exhibits a curious decline. They are no longer made of stone, but of clay, and the lifelike engravings give way to crude geometric figures. Indeed, a decline takes place in every area of Mohenjo Daro's life. The pottery, once highly glazed and vividly colored, becomes plain and clumsy ware. Worst of all, the superb planning of the city collapses: the last buildings are mere higgledy-piggledy collections of jerry-built, shoddy hovels. In the end, the city is abandoned.

At Harappa the story is different, but equally baffling. There, archeologists have found no evidence of a slow decline: the life of the city seems simply to stop, while it is still in its maturity and at the height of its material prosperity. Such an ending, of course, is no less final than that of Mohenjo Daro; in the upper Indus Valley, as in the lower, the civilization completely disappeared.

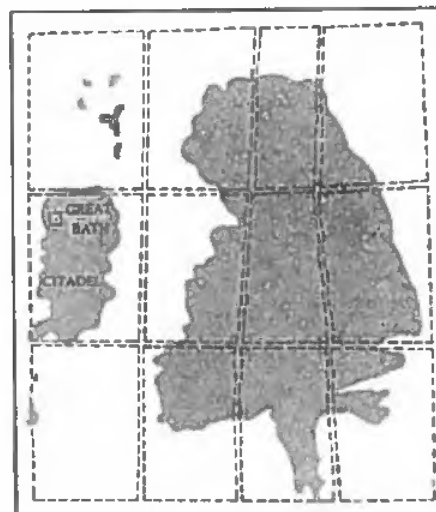
Most archeologists agree that no single explanation can account for the disappearance of the Indus Valley civilization. A thousand years of farming, grazing and timbering may have so impoverished the land that it could no longer support a large and powerful civilization. Evidence of great floods at Mohenjo Daro suggests another explanation. Driven

from the capital again and again, the people of Mohenjo Daro may have become homeless refugees elsewhere, and the lesser cities of the region may have declined for lack of leadership. Other geological changes, equally slow and irreversible, such as the lifting of an entire coastline, may have assaulted some cities even more directly: it is known, for example, that certain Indus seaports that once stood on the shore of the Arabian Sea now lie as much as 30 miles inland.

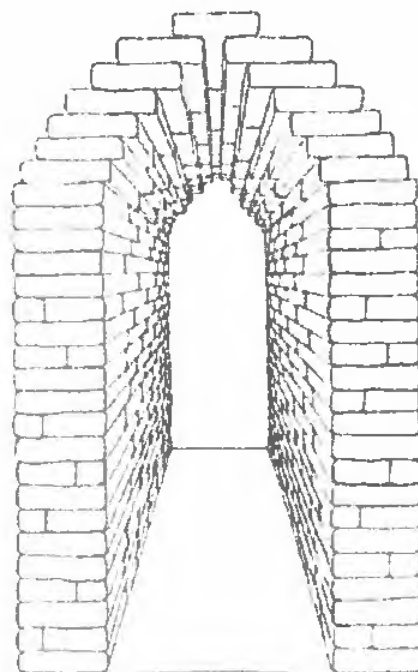
For the disappearance of the Indus culture in the north, these explanations will not suffice. There, the deathblow to the Indus civilization was sudden and violent. And the dealers of that deathblow, according to some historians, were tall, fair-skinned nomads from Central Asia, who swept into India's northwest plains about the middle of the Second Millennium B.C. Ravaging the country as they came, these nomads put an end to a culture far higher than their own. But they also set the course of all later Indian history.

The invaders called themselves Aryans—"the noble ones"—a word that may come from a long-dead Indo-European language. This language, which probably evolved as a number of closely related dialects, was spoken by great masses of barbarians who began to move out of the steppes of Central Asia about 2000 B.C. Some of these nomadic tribesmen settled in Asia Minor and Persia; others became the ancestors of the Greeks. The Aryans, who may have taken centuries to make their way into India, were probably typical of them all.

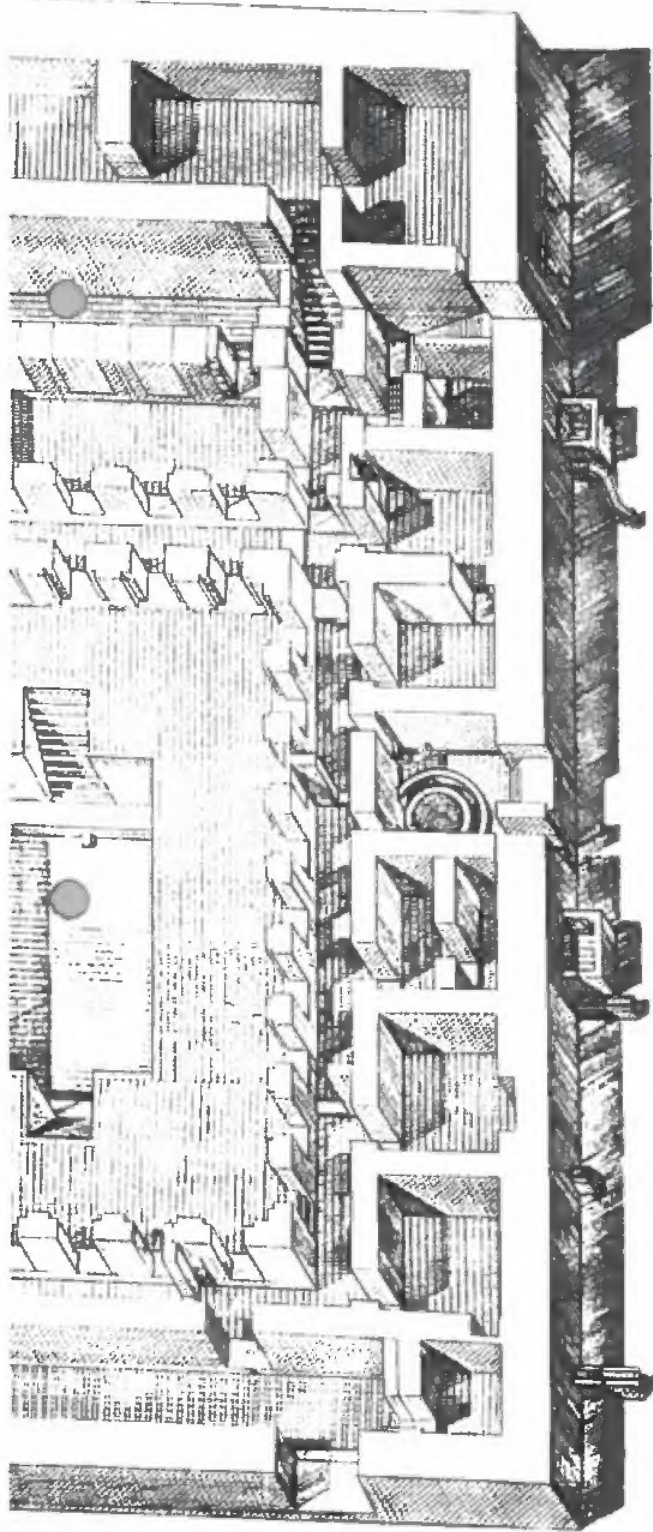
As they cut a swath through northwest India and eastward into the Punjab region, the Aryans introduced a pattern of life that was to persist for centuries. Intertribal warfare was common; temporary alliances were formed to conquer or subdue non-Aryan peoples. Some of these alliances must have been formed to attack the people of the Indus civilization. For such attacks, the Aryans flung



A MONUMENTAL BATH is the most impressive structure yet excavated at Mohenjo Daro, a city of some 20,000 people that flourished in the Indus Valley between 2500 and 1500 B.C. Located in the citadel area of the city (map, above), the "Great Bath" was probably used mainly for religious rites, as is suggested by its arrangement of small ceremonial robing and bathing rooms (seen in the cutaway view at right). The rooms surround a courtyard containing a pool some 40 feet long and 8 feet deep, which was waterproofed with bitumen. Water from the pool emptied into a large vaulted drain more than 6 feet high (drawing below) that may have connected with the city's sewage system.







themselves into battle on light, swift, horse-drawn chariots—against a people who had never seen anything faster or more maneuverable than a lumbering bullock cart. Even the fortified citadels of the Indus cities succumbed to Aryan sieges and storms. In some of their earliest writings, the invaders described successful onslaughts against dark-skinned non-Aryan peoples who lived in purs or "forts," and they called their war-god puramdara, "fort destroyer." Some archeologists identify one such fortified place, called Hari-Yupuya by the Aryans, as the great Indus city of Harappa.

deur/  
two?

Throughout the Indus Valley, the conquerors doomed the high urban civilization that preceded them. The Aryans were wandering herdsmen. Their food and clothing came from cattle, cows and bulls were their measure of wealth; and though they eventually took to farming they continued to feel that a man's dignity lay in his herds rather than in his crops. Such a people could not maintain or even comprehend a complex urban culture. Writing, craftsmanship, arts and architecture—these ornaments and achievements of the Indus civilization died in Aryan hands.

For this reason, the early Aryan period is a sort of archeologist's nightmare. The Aryans left no cities and statues, no stone seals, no pots or bricks or cemeteries for scientists to dig up, classify and interpret. What they did leave, however, is one of the most extraordinary bodies of literature in all the world. The great "artifact" of the Aryan culture—and, in fact, very nearly the sole source of information about Aryan history and society during that period—is a collection of religious writings, a set of scriptures.

In India, Aryan priests built up an exhaustive record of their religious beliefs and practices. Composed in a complex poetic style already perfected in pre-Indian days, and passed along by memorization and recitation, this record grew by slow accretion

for a thousand years. Its four great books, the Vedas, have given their name to that entire period of Indian history. The years from 1500 to 500 B.C.—the thousand-year period in which the fundamental principles of Hinduism were laid down—are generally called the Vedic Age.

The earliest and most important of the four Vedic books, the Rig Veda, consists of over a thousand hymns—a heterogeneous collection of prayers, instructions for rituals, incantations, poems on nature, and such secular songs as a gambler's lament over his luck at dice. The other three books, more specialized in content, are the Yajur Veda, the Sama Veda and the Atharva Veda, which consist respectively of technical instructions for the priests, ritual formulas and magical spells.

During the long Vedic Age, commentaries on the Vedas—and commentaries on these commentaries—were gradually compiled. The Brahmanas, commentaries on the Vedas themselves, discuss specific techniques of rituals in enormous detail. The Aranyakas, or "forest books," deal with the language of the rituals—phrases, words, syllables, even individual sounds. And in the Upanishads, a collection of philosophical treatises, the main concern is with the mystical significance of ritual rather than its practice: the Upanishads expound a multitude of speculative interpretations of the universe and man's place in it.

Just as the lack of concrete Aryan remains has frustrated the archeologist, the Vedas and their voluminous commentaries have baffled the historian. Other sacred literatures, including the Bible, often deal with sequences of events in time. The ancient Hebrews, for example, might tell the story of a particular king's defeat in battle because the story revealed something about the way in which God operated in the world. The Vedas, on the other hand, never treat historical events as manifestations of the Aryan gods. For the authors

of the Vedas, ritual formed the only direct connection between man and the gods. As a result, the Vedas provide no dates, no dynasties, no wars or peace treaties—no events or series of events that a historian can place in any precise chronology.

The oldest sacred books do, however, reveal a great deal about the Aryan religion and society, and later books reveal how that religion and society slowly changed during the thousand years of the Vedic Age.

We know, for example, that the religion brought to India by the Aryans was, as might be expected, a cult of gods related to the needs of a more northern life—gods of fire, of warming drink and sheer ferocity. We know, too, that these gods were served by a separate priesthood, who performed sacrificial rituals. Indeed, the rite of sacrifice lay at the heart of early Aryan religion. No temples or images were involved: the rite was performed at a simple open altar, where a sacred fire carried to the gods the food and drink that men themselves enjoyed—cooked grain, slaughtered animals, clarified butter and an intoxicating potion called "soma."

Soma itself was one of the Aryan gods. For its preparation, a certain plant, now unknown, was pressed between stones and its juice was mixed with milk. Drunk during the ritual, it induced in the celebrants hallucinations, such as the illusion of enormous size. Until recent studies of psychedelic drugs, historians were at a loss to explain how soma, an unfermented drink, could cause intoxication in those who used it. It now seems likely that the sacred drink was actually a "mind-expanding" antique LSD.

The sacred fire, too, was a god. Agni, the god of fire, had a curious variety of functions and jurisdictions. "Butter-backed and flame-haired," according to the Rig Veda, he lived in three places: on earth, in heaven and throughout the air between. On earth, the sacred fire became the mouth with



which the gods consumed burnt offerings. In heaven, Agni was the sun. And in the air he was the lightning, carrying messages up to the gods or bringing the gods down to earth when they were summoned in the rituals.

More human in his characteristics than either Soma or Agni was Indra, the god of heroes and of war, who led the Aryans in battle and used a thunderbolt as a weapon. Pleasure-loving and quite amoral, Indra was a perfect counterpart for the cheerful optimists who worshiped him. (He may, in fact, have been a deification of some early Aryan leader.) His fondness for feasting and drinking, gambling and dancing—and, of course, for making war—reflected the character of a robust, extroverted people who had little of the spirituality and none of the pessimism that are now commonly associated with India.

Among these people, the great cohesive force was not the rule of the gods, but the basic idea of an all-pervading cosmic order called "rita." Rita was the law that both sustained the universe and regulated the conduct of men. It governed such rhythms as those of day and night, or the turning of the seasons, and it fixed the relationships of man to the gods and of a man to other men. Thus, for the Aryans, men were part of the law of nature. If men lied or were carried away by anger or drink, they disturbed the cosmic order.

Rita itself was associated with a god—Varuna—an awesome, unyielding figure who sat in a palace in heaven. Varuna had not created the cosmic order; he was merely its guardian. But he guarded rita so sternly that he became the only god that the Aryans really feared.

Certainly, there was little else they feared. The Vedas picture a people of enormous pride, utterly convinced of their own racial and social superiority. For the local peoples of India, the non-Aryans, they had nothing but contempt and overwhelming

scorn. These conquered peoples were completely segregated, forced to live in clusters outside the Aryan village boundaries and banned from Aryan religious rites.

The principle of segregating the non-Aryans also extended to the social order. According to the Vedas, the Aryans came into India loosely divided into three classes. At the top of each tribe were hereditary nobles, who chose one of their number as chief, or raja (an Indo-European word related to the Latin rex, or "king"). The second class consisted of priests, responsible for religious teaching and observances. Then came the ordinary tribesmen, the tenders of cattle. All conquered peoples were herded into a fourth group—a group that was inferior to the other three.

This early class system was not the caste system of modern India; there were, for example, no restrictions on diet or dining practices, on marriage or on hereditary occupation. "A bard [professional poet] am I, my father is a leech [physician] and my mother grinds corn," wrote an anonymous Aryan of the time. Nevertheless, the function of each class and of each member of a class was perfectly clear and distinct. A raja, for instance, probably owned more cattle than any other noble, but his role was simply that of a member of the noble class. He was not considered divine, nor was he a priest-king. The closest he could come to playing a religious role was to request sacrifices for the good of the tribe. Only the priests, a separate class, could perform such sacrifices.

Such were the social and religious patterns of early Aryan life. During the thousand-year course of the Vedic Age, however, these patterns gradually evolved into different ones, more complex and more rigid. The great force behind this evolution was the same one that had brought Aryans to India in the first place: the constant movement, century after century, of the Aryan people.

Some time after they had learned enough about agriculture to grow crops of their own, the Aryans began to move deeper into India. From their first base, the Indus Valley and the Punjab, their route ran southeast to the middle of the Indo-Gangetic plain, the area of modern Delhi. From there, they probably conquered and colonized their way to the Ganges itself, then followed the river southward to settle the area around Banaras (newly restored to its ancient name, Varanasi). The movement was a gradual one. As many as 600 years probably passed before the Aryans began to penetrate the Deccan.

During this long period of territorial expansion, Aryan tribes fought continually against each other and, more important, against the original inhabitants of the land. Among these indigenous peoples, two groups—the Panis and the Dasas—loom out of the mists of Vedic history. The Panis may have been aboriginal peoples of the very earliest hill cultures in the northwest. Apparently, they offered little resistance to the Aryan advance; for the most part, they appear dimly in the Vedic writings as robbers who stole cattle and had to be punished. Far more formidable—and even more difficult to identify—were the Dasas. They may have been remnants or relatives of the peoples of the Indus civilization; some historians suggest that they were Dravidians, the people of southern India. In any case, they proved far less easy to handle than the Panis. At one time the Dasas raised 10,000 men to oppose the Aryans, but were defeated. As always, the Aryans treated their enemy with complete contempt. In the Vedas, the Dasas are described as “evil-tongued” and “flat-nosed,” and in the Aryans’ Sanskrit language the very word *dasa* ultimately came to mean “slave.”

The conquest of new lands and contacts with new peoples combined to bring profound changes to the Aryan way of life. Wandering tribes settled in small kingdoms; the tribal chiefs, once chosen

by their peers, became power-hungry hereditary kings ruling from permanent capitals. And as kingdoms grew in territory and population, and victors and vanquished fused, the loose classes of Aryan society became more complex.

In the later Vedic Age, a king’s realm usually included conquered Aryan tribes and a number of non-Aryan villages. To meet the threat of revolt, and of attacks from outside the kingdom, kings recruited standing armies from the old noble class of warriors. The kings themselves now claimed a rank far above that of other nobles.

The old class of ordinary tribesmen—once the herdsmen among the original nomadic Aryans—became peaceful farmers, cattle breeders, artisans and tradesmen. Meanwhile, descendants of the non-Aryan peoples became a fourth class—a class of laborers, who did the drudgery that freed higher classes for their occupations and interests.

The greatest change of all took place among the priests—a change not so much of function as of status. In early Aryan society, the priest class had held the second rank, below the nobles. Now they raised themselves above the nobles, above the kings—even above the gods. They accomplished this feat by giving a new importance—indeed, a new meaning—to religious ritual.

Over the years, the priests had developed enormously complex rituals out of the relatively simple ceremonies of the Rig Veda. In addition, they emphasized the idea that if a ritual were performed incorrectly catastrophe would ensue. If a single brick of the altar were out of line by a hair’s breadth, if the sacrificial goat were touched at the wrong spot, then the cosmic order called *rita* would be upset and chaos would come.

This demand for ritual accuracy may have helped to improve the priests’ skill at altar building and their knowledge of anatomy. What was far more important, it exalted the priesthood. *Rita* depended

# अर्य

## AN ANCIENT TREE OF LANGUAGE

The Sanskrit characters above may look utterly remote from anything Western, but in fact Sanskrit, the classical language of India, is related to almost all the languages of Europe, including English. The word is "Arya," or "Aryan," the name of the people who began to conquer India about 1500 B.C. Most ancient Indian literature was written in the Aryan tongue, Sanskrit, and Hindi, modern India's national language, is written in characters that are derived from it.

Sanskrit is a branch of a linguistic tree known as Indo-European. The trunk of the tree was a common tongue probably spoken in the region northwest of the Black Sea about 2500 B.C. After the people living in this region migrated in different directions, the tree branched into different but related languages. "Iran," the modern name for Persia, for example, resembles the Sanskrit "Arya." In Celtic the word was transformed into "Erin," which in English became "Ireland." Other examples of word relationships:

*Pitar*, the Sanskrit word for "father," is a close cognate of the Latin *pater*, the German *Vater* and the English words "father" and "paternal."

*Ayas*, meaning "metal" in Sanskrit, comes from the same root word as the Latin *aes* (bronze), the German *Eisen* (iron) and the English "iron."

The Sanskrit *iras*, or "anger," bears a close resemblance to the Latin *ira*, which became "ire" in English and appears in words like "irascible."

The Indo-European word *petis* (foot) became *pad* in Sanskrit and *pes* in Latin, and appears in such English words as "pedal" and "pedestrian."

*Sutam*, the Sanskrit word for "one hundred," is a cousin of the Latin *centum*, which lives on in English words like "century" and "centennial."

more upon the correct performance of rituals than upon the gods for whom rituals were performed. The gods merely guarded rita; the rituals actually affected it. And since only the priests could perform these rituals, the priests held the final responsibility for cosmic order. They were the most important creatures in the universe.

Even the kings assented to the glorification of the priesthood. The Rig Veda assured them that "that king, indeed, overpowers all opposing forces . . . who maintains [the priest] well attended, and praises and honors him as a deity." In turn, the priests gave religious support to the rajas and their expanding kingdoms. At times, that support resulted in curious combinations of piety and power politics. A case in point was the ritual of the "horse sacrifice."

In preparation for the horse sacrifice, a beautiful stallion was consecrated and allowed to wander for a full year. All the territory the stallion entered was claimed for the king who had commissioned the ritual. A band of armed warriors attended the horse, and the kings of usurped lands had to give up their property or fight for it. Finally, the horse was gently herded home and sacrificed in elaborate ceremonies involving hundreds of priests.

Along with the new interdependence of king and priest, there was a new religious justification for the class system. In one of the later Vedic writings, the priests proclaimed that the universe had been born when the gods sacrificed an Ideal Man or World Spirit and created classes of men from parts of his body. A Vedic hymn asks how social classes were created, and, in the answers, gives religious sanction to the four divisions of Aryan society:

When they [the gods] divided the Man,  
into how many parts did they divide him?  
What was his mouth, what were his arms,  
what were his thighs and his feet called?

namus  
no  
Kul  
Brahmin

Purusha



*The braluman [priest] was his mouth,  
of his arms was made the warrior,  
his thighs became the vaishya [farmer  
or merchant],  
of his feet the shudra [servant] was born.*

The implications of this primal sacrifice went far beyond the idea of social classes. Every time the priests performed their rites they mystically repeated the creation of the world; the cosmic order died and was born again. And the death and rebirth of the universe implied the death and rebirth of every living thing in the universe. What is more, it implied a continuous cycle of such deaths and rebirths.

For human beings, this cycle of death and rebirth meant reincarnation, one of the basic concepts of Hinduism. In the earliest statements of the doctrine, reincarnation involved a great deal of traveling on the part of the soul. If a man lived a good life, his soul passed after death to the paradise of the gods. From there it went to the moon, from the moon to empty space, and it then descended to earth again in the form of rain. On earth, in the words of the Upanishads, souls "become food . . . and are offered again in the altar-fire which is man, to be born again in the fire of woman."

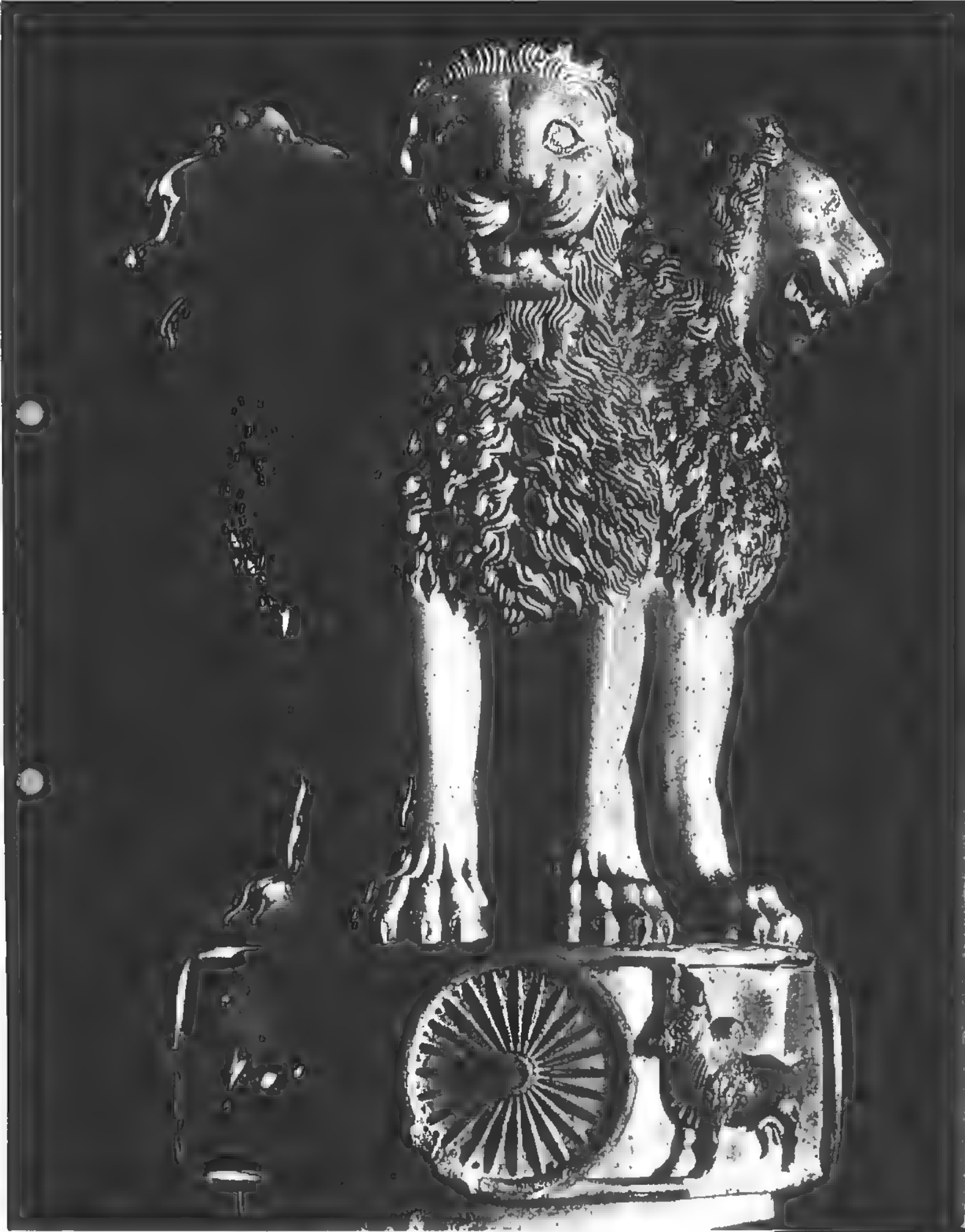
The entire journey, though, depended upon whether a man had lived a good or bad life. Only the man who had devoted himself to good pursuits—charity, sacrifice and austerity—would be rewarded by rebirth in a human body. The unrighteous would be reborn as worms, birds or insects. Thus, it was a man's conduct in this life that determined whether his status would rise or fall in future lives, and whether he would be happy or miserable. The Hindu concept of "karma" was slowly being born, and, along with that essentially theological concept, Hinduism's justification for extreme and irremediable inequalities in human society.

Clearly, a thousand years of development and change had brought the Aryans a long way from their beginnings. The purely Aryan tribal life of the early Vedic Age had given way to a complex social order and an advanced religion. The contrasts between the beginning and the end of the age can be briefly summarized.

The Aryans had come to India with simple, direct feelings for men and for the gods. In return for an offering of food or drink poured into a fire at a hearth, men received the blessings of the gods. Girls chose their husbands freely, and shifts of class membership were not impossible. Family life was open and informal, and the patriarchal family way of life was duplicated in tribal life. The chief, like the father of a family, had authority but not absolute authority. His power was subject to common law and Aryan traditions, which he could not override.

A thousand years later, the kings in their palaces were arrogant, ambitious rulers, most of them determined to rule the world. The old, easy family life was overlaid and formalized by religious ideas of divinely ordained hereditary classes, and by a host of restrictions and proscriptions. Religion itself had become two very different things: on the one hand, a great complex of meticulously organized rites; on the other, an intellectual discipline beyond the comprehension of most ordinary people. And priests were by far the most powerful group in the community.

In effect, Hinduism had come into existence. Toward the end of the Vedic Age dramatic protests were to be made against it by such men as Gautama Buddha, the greatest of all Indian religious leaders, but such protests did not alter the fundamentals of Indian religion or society. The Aryan-fostered, priest-led way of life had been securely founded, and would prevail through all the rest of the subcontinent's history.



# 4

## ASHOKA, EMPEROR OF PEACE

Some time about the year 320 B.C., a young Indian warrior-king named Chandragupta Maurya set out to build an empire. His qualifications for the job were uncertain, and his prospects must have seemed dubious. Chandragupta's origins were apparently obscure to begin with, and have been further obscured by centuries of legend. His very name has become a subject of dispute: some legends trace the name "Maurya" to the phrase *mayura poshaka*, the title of a lowly caste of peacock tamers, while others derive it from a warrior clan called the Moriyas.

Even the legends that place Chandragupta in the high-born warrior class are curiously vague about his early years. According to one such legend, his father lost his life in a petty war before the boy's birth, and Chandragupta was brought up in an obscure village under the care of a cowherd and, later, of a hunter.

Against whatever odds of birth or upbringing, Chandragupta Maurya attained his ambitions. During his lifetime, he extended his power from a base in the central Ganges Valley east and west to the farthest limits of the Indo-Gangetic plain. His descendants, the emperors of the Mauryan dynasty, held sway over still vaster areas. At its height, the Mauryan Empire was the first great Indian empire of historic times.

The beginnings of that empire reveal a pattern of political development that has been repeated in different places and at different times throughout world history. On the one hand, there was a strong native state, constantly growing in extent and power—in this case, the kingdom of Magadha on the central Ganges River. On the other, there was a region under foreign domination—the region to the northwest, the Punjab and the Indus Valley, ruled successively by Persians and Greeks. In the course of time the native state, led by Chandragupta, established its supremacy over all of northern India from the Bay of Bengal to the Arabian Sea.

Magadha had certain advantages from the start. As much as 200 years before Chandragupta's time, the kingdom had begun to develop a river trade that brought it into contact with sailors and merchants far up and down the Ganges. The plains surrounding Magadha had fertile soil, forests thick

5 MEMORIAL, a column capped by four scowling lions, is one of the monuments erected by the Mauryan emperor Ashoka to proclaim his edicts and policies. Modern India preserves the lion figure on its official seal.



with timber, rich mines and herds of elephants that could be used for work or for war. Gradually the wealthy, cosmopolitan state began to expand. Bimbisara, a Magadhan king of the Sixth Century B.C., won a foothold in the lands to the west and north by marriage alliances, then conquered the lands to the southeast that controlled trade in the delta of the Ganges. His successors pushed the frontiers still farther, and made Magadha the strongest of the kingdoms in the Ganges plain. Finally, about 322 B.C., the kingdom reached a turning point when Chandragupta Maurya seized the throne.

It may not have seemed a turning point at the time. The legends of Chandragupta's life, which are so vague in describing his origins, do little to explain his rise to power. But it is clear that he emerged as a skillful military leader who opposed and eventually overthrew the legitimate kings of Magadha. And once in supreme command, he turned his eyes westward, beyond the Ganges plain to the Indus Valley and the country of the far northwest.

These western regions had had a very different history from that of northeast India. In 531 B.C. Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian Empire, led an invading army across the Hindu Kush mountains and into India, by 518 one of his successors, Darius I, had conquered the Indus Valley and the Punjab. Through these military victories, northwest India became a province—called the "twentieth satrapy"—of the Persian Empire. For nearly 200 years the Persians ruled the region with an iron hand. According to the Greek historian Herodotus, the twentieth satrapy paid more tribute to Persia than any other division of the empire, and a contingent of Indian troops served under the Persian emperor Xerxes in his invasion of Greece in 479 B.C. On the other hand, the peoples of northern India gained something from the Persian

occupation. Sophisticated Persian styles in art and architecture were influential throughout the region, it was an educational center to which came well-born young men from such Indian kingdoms as Magadha, and some historians argue that even the expansionist policies of Magadha were inspired by the Persian example.

It was not the Indians, however, who finally ended Persian rule in the region. In 331 B.C. the Macedonian conqueror Alexander the Great won a crucial victory against Persian forces near the Tigris River. Having destroyed Persian power at its source, Alexander drove eastward, and in 327 entered India to take possession of the Persian territories there. His troops fought their way into the northwest, defeating both Persian and native Indian forces and planting settlements as they came. For a moment in the history of northwest India, it seemed that one foreign ruler would be permanently replaced by another.

But only for a moment. Within two years Alexander had left India, never to return, in 323, with his dream of ruling the world completely shattered, he died in Babylon, far to the west. In a sense, it was the Indian subcontinent itself that defeated the would-be world conqueror. Alexander had come to India with the false notion that the subcontinent was a small peninsula, with its farther shore only a short distance beyond the Indus River. Once he crossed the Indus, however, he realized that unknown immensities lay before him. What was more important, his troops, wearied in battles against local Indian forces and terrified by tales of fierce peoples and frightful beasts in the unknown lands ahead, refused to go farther. And the long retreat to Babylonia, through the searing deserts that border the Arabian Sea, weakened Alexander's army and broke his power. A modern historian, comparing Alexander with Napoleon Bonaparte, another would-be conqueror of vast

INDIA'S FIRST GREAT EMPIRE, the Mauryan, was founded by Chandragupta, who seized the throne of the Magadha kingdom in 322 B.C. He and his son annexed all of northern and central India; his grandson, Ashoka, who ruled from 269 to 232 B.C., conquered Kalinga and governed most of the subcontinent—shown by the far-flung sites of monuments and rocks carved with his edicts.



but thwarted ambitions, has said that "the Indian expedition was Alexander's Moscow campaign."

From the point of view of northeast India, however, Alexander's departure created a great military and political opportunity. The small outposts and garrisons left behind by the Macedonians soon withered away, and the Indian kings of the northwest, who had held no real power for centuries, were too weak to take command. A power vacuum had been formed—and Chandragupta Maurya was eager to fill it. He assumed the Magadhan throne about two years after Alexander's retreat from India and began almost at once to move in on the northwest.

Within a decade, Chandragupta made himself master of the Punjab and the Indus Valley. In 305 B.C., he met and defeated Seleucus Nicator, a successor of Alexander's who was attempting to recover the dead emperor's Indian provinces. Instead of regaining lost lands, Seleucus had to give up

lands of his own in the mountainous northwest—Baluchistan, and the regions of Kabul, Kandahar and Herat in what is now Afghanistan. (Legends suggest that as part of the arrangement Seleucus also gave his daughter to Chandragupta in marriage, while the Indian ruler made a regal gift of 500 elephants to the man he had defeated.)

Chandragupta was now an emperor rather than a king. From his capital at Pataliputra, on the site of the present-day city of Patna in northeast India, he ruled an empire that included the plains of the Indus and Ganges Rivers and the high country of the northwest. To this realm, his descendants added even larger territories. Chandragupta's son Bindusara, who reigned from about 298 to 273 B.C., probably extended the empire's border southward, deep into the Deccan plateau and as far down the western coast as modern Mysore. Ashoka, Chandragupta's grandson and the third king of the Mauryan dynasty, brought the Mauryan Empire to

its height. During his long reign from 269 to 232 B.C., he conquered Kalinga, a region on the eastern coast of India.

The relative precision with which these events can be dated reflects a significant development in Indian history. For the first time, genuine historical documents can be called upon for a clear picture of political change and—in even greater detail—social conditions. There are, for example, the reports of a Greek diplomat, Megasthenes, who served as Seleucus Nicator's ambassador at the court of Chandragupta for several years. There is a manual of politics and statecraft called the *Arthashastra*, attributed to Chandragupta's chief minister, a brahman named Kautilya. Most important, there are Ashoka's edicts, carved on pillars and rocks, which provide both a record of the time and a statement of its highest ethical code.

To be sure, these sources have their limitations. The diplomat Megasthenes, for instance, wrote in much the fashion that an ambassador might write today; his accounts of Chandragupta's empire are short on information about the life of ordinary people, but full of details about the organization of the state and the life of the court. From these accounts, it is clear that Chandragupta—and, in all likelihood, his descendants—imposed strict, highly centralized rule over the vast Mauryan realm. The emperor himself held final authority over military, legislative and judicial matters. Below him was a rigid centralized bureaucracy, with separate departments for such areas as trade and commerce, agriculture, forestry and public works, all operating independently of each other and directly responsible to the emperor. Officials of these departments made their headquarters in the capital, Pataliputra, but maintained staffs of supervisors and subordinate officials at local centers.

The smallest of these local centers were the villages, each with its own headman. The headman

reported to the officials of a district, consisting of a group of villages. The governor or chief official of a district reported in turn to the officials of a province, which consisted of a group of districts. Four of these provinces, with capitals at Taxila, Ujjain, Dhauri and Suvarnagiri, have been identified. Each province was headed by a viceroy, often a member of the royal family, who reported directly to the central government.

In this hierarchy, the district governor often held more power than his intermediate rank would imply. His association with his region often predated the empire, and he seems to have exercised semi-independent control over his land and villages. In addition, many a governor apparently took as part of his job the sly supervision of his viceregal superior. But ambitious governors represented only one of the dangers that Chandragupta had to guard against. His huge empire was a new one, and consisted of a motley collection of petty, pugnacious states. Despite all the checking and double-checking of government agents, conspiracy and rebellion were a constant threat. To meet this threat, the emperor set up an elaborate system of personal precautions and repressive controls.

For fear of assassination, Chandragupta was constantly guarded and frequently changed his sleeping quarters. When a rebel or traitor was detected, the death penalty followed as a matter of course; to obtain confessions or inflict punishment, frightful tortures were devised. In the *Arthashastra*, an 18-day cycle of tortures is described, with a different method of torture suggested for each day. To justify such procedures, the manual provided one of the most cold-blooded aphorisms in political history: "Government is the science of punishment."

A despotism as ruthless as this needed ruthless organizations to support it—and such organizations came into being. Chandragupta created repressive extensions of his personal authority, in his spy



system and his army, which ranged the empire with no check on their power and no formal attachments at the local level.

The spy system was a gigantic secret service that both funneled information to the emperor and carried out his secret orders. "The ablest and most trustworthy men are appointed to fill these offices," reported Megasthenes. The *Arthashastra*, which devotes two chapters to the system, gives a fuller picture. From that highly realistic work, one modern student, A. L. Basham, has drawn up a list of different kinds of spies: "Brahmans unable to make a living by their learning, merchants fallen on evil days, barbers, astrologers, humble servitors, prostitutes, peasants." One group of secret agents consisted of orphans raised from childhood to pass themselves off as fortune tellers or holy men, because such men were especially trusted by the populace. Another group was "that of the desperado, recruited from professional prize-fighters; the main duty of such an agent was the assassination of those enemies of the king for whom a public trial was not expedient."

The army, of course, needed no such secrecy to carry on its work. Its original task was to conquer new territory and to pacify the outposts of empire. The *Arthashastra*, typically free of any trace of morality or altruism, described this function in words that might have been written by an Indian Machiavelli: "With increasing strength, make war; when you have a clear advantage over a neighbor, march against him; do not disturb the customs of a newly conquered people." But Chandragupta's army had a domestic function, too: its garrisons throughout the empire held the people in check and suppressed the smallest sign of sedition or revolt.

To perform both these functions, the imperial army was magnificently equipped. At its height, it numbered 700,000 men, with 9,000 elephants and 10,000 chariots. According to Megasthenes, its op-

erations were supervised by a central War Council of 30 officials, who held responsibility for everything from food and transport to the maintenance of the proper servants to beat drums, carry gongs and perform a host of military ceremonies. In fact, the troops seem to have had a wonderfully easy time of it when they were not on the field. Megasthenes reported that Indian soldiers "lead a life of supreme freedom and enjoyment. They have only military duties to perform. Others . . . attend on them in the camp . . . take care of their horses, clean their arms, drive their elephants, prepare their chariots and act as their charioteers."

Protected by this pampered army and by his hidden army of spies, Chandragupta led a public life of enormous pomp and splendor. The occasions on which he appeared outside his palace walls were generally celebrated by gorgeous royal processions. The emperor, wearing fine muslin robes embroidered in purple and gold, was borne forth on a gold litter lavishly decorated with pearls. His guards rode elephants emblazoned with gold and silver; some of these guards carried trees on which live birds perched, and a flock of trained parrots hovered over the emperor or whirled about his head.

Such processions were often part of one or another religious festival, but the emperor also indulged himself in sports, particularly hunting. His guards and fellow participants in the hunt were comely women, armed with swords and riding as swiftly and freely as men. The spectator sport that most delighted him, as it did so many kings and emperors after him, was racing, though he also enjoyed watching fights between wild bulls, rams, rhinoceroses and elephants. Chandragupta's favorite racers were a breed of trotter oxen which could run as fast as horses.

But there was another side of the emperor's life, and a far more important one. Despite all the cruelty of his rule and the vanity of his public displays,

A NATURE-GODDESS, standing beneath lotus flowers, was carved as a guardian figure for a Buddhist monument. Such sculpture was inspired by the patronage of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka.

Chandragupta devoted himself to public business and the public good. The *Arthashastra*, generally so heartless in its advice, contains this wise admonition to the head of state:

*In the happiness of his subjects lies a king's happiness,  
In the welfare of his subjects, his welfare.  
A king's good is not that which pleases him,  
But that which pleases his subjects.*

It is clear that, according to his own lights, Chandragupta worked unstintingly for his subjects' happiness and welfare. Megasthenes reported that "even when the king has his hair combed and dressed, he has no respite from public business." And the emperor did benefit his people. Under his leadership, the empire enjoyed a time of general prosperity and busy trade. Irrigation systems were built and regulated; a network of roads was maintained. To Indians of later times, the reign of Chandragupta Maurya came to represent the beginning of a golden age.

Even the emperor's personal life seems to have undergone a radical change in his last years. According to one tradition, the once-mighty hunter and warrior embraced Jainism, the creed that opposed all violence and killing, even the killing of living things for food. It is said that after 24 years of absolute rule the old empire-builder abdicated his throne to become a Jain monk. He entered the temple of Shravana Belgola—still an active Jain monastery in Mysore—and, in imitation of the founder of the sect, fasted to death.

If Chandragupta represented the promise of a golden age, his grandson, the Emperor Ashoka, brought that promise to fulfillment. During Ashoka's reign, the Mauryan Empire continued to grow and to prosper—but with a difference. For the first time in Indian history, a great state was led by a man who preached goodness, gentleness and non-

violence, and who based his own policies on a high ethical code. By his example and his actions, the emperor proved himself, in the words of historian A. L. Basham, "the greatest and noblest ruler India has known, and indeed one of the great kings of the world."

The best testimony to this nobility and greatness exists in Ashoka's own words, inscribed in his famous edicts. Still to be seen on rocks, in caves and on specially erected pillars, these inscriptions speak as directly to posterity as they did to the emperor's subjects. About 30 have been discovered, in sites ranging almost 1,500 miles from the Hindu Kush mountains to Mysore, and as far eastward as the coast of the Bay of Bengal. Taken together, the edicts constitute an extraordinary revelation



of the thoughts and decisions of a truly great man.

But the edicts are the fruits of Ashoka's maturity. In his early years he seems to have led the conventional military and political apprenticeship of a potential heir to the throne. He probably served as his father's deputy on the field in campaigns of conquest; to gain experience in government, he also served as viceroy in the provinces of Ujjain and Taxila. What is more, his accession to the throne, according to some legends, was violent: and the great military achievement of his reign, the conquest of the region called Kalinga, on India's east coast, was bloody and merciless.

The Kalinga campaign of 261 B.C. proved to be a turning point in Ashoka's life. It was the last war he ever fought and, in one of the best known of his edicts, he told of his revulsion and remorse:

*The Kalingas were conquered by His Sacred and Gracious Majesty when he had been consecrated eight years. 150,000 persons were thence carried away captive, 100,000 were slain and many times that number died. Just after the taking of Kalinga His Sacred Majesty began to follow Righteousness, to love Righteousness, to give instruction in Righteousness. When an unconquered country is conquered, people are killed, they die, or are made captive. Thus arose His Sacred Majesty's remorse for having conquered the Kalingas. . . . Today, if a hundredth or a thousandth part of those who suffered in Kalinga were to be killed, to die or be taken captive, it would be very grievous to His Sacred Majesty. If anyone does him wrong it will be forgiven so far as it can be forgiven.*

The "Righteousness" of which Ashoka spoke was almost certainly a reference to the teachings of the Buddha. Though the edicts rarely mention Bud-

dhism, but use instead the more comprehensive phrase "the law of Righteousness," it is clear that the emperor was converted to Buddhism at about the time of the fall of Kalinga. How far he understood or sympathized with the intricacies of Buddhist theology, we cannot tell; some historians have suggested that the emperor deliberately used the ideas of Buddhism as a unifying creed to which all his dissimilar subjects could subscribe. Of his own devotion to Buddhist ideals, however, there can be no doubt. And he was in a position to give the religion powerful support.

During Ashoka's reign a council of theologians met at Pataliputra to codify the Buddhist canon—the laws and principles of a new formal religion. What was more important, the emperor made Buddhism a missionary faith, comparable to such later world religions as Christianity and Islam. According to his own records, he sent emissaries to the kings of Egypt, Macedonia and the Near East, hoping in vain to convert them to his beliefs. Nearer home, he was more successful: Buddhism spread throughout India, though it never became the dominant religion, and Ashoka's son (or, according to some traditions, his brother) converted the king of Ceylon. From there Buddhism spread to the lands of Southeast Asia, where it was to remain strong to the present time.

It was in his own realm, however, that Ashoka was best able to put the humane, benevolent ideals of Buddhism into practice—and his determination to do so took very practical forms indeed. For example, the emperor appointed special "Officers of Righteousness," who went to all parts of the empire to oversee local officials. The officers made certain that local authorities promoted "welfare and happiness . . . among servants and masters, brahmins and rich, the needy and the aged." More specifically, they were responsible for preventing all "wrongful imprisonment or chastisement," and for



ensuring special consideration for "cases where a man has a large family, has been smitten by calamity, or is advanced in years."

The amenities of daily life became the emperor's concern. He ordered medicinal herbs planted for the use of all his subjects, and took thought for the comfort of his people. In the words of one edict: "I have had banyan trees planted to give shade to man and beast; groves of mango trees I have had planted. . . . I have caused wells to be dug; rest-houses have been erected; and numerous watering places have been provided by me here and there for the enjoyment of man and beast."

In subtler ways, Ashoka tried to teach the doctrine of *ahimsa*, or nonviolence, and the sacredness of all living things. He himself gave up his grandfather's favorite pastime, the hunt, and forbade the killing of animals "which are neither used nor eaten." A curious proclamation on the palace menu shows how far the emperor carried the doctrine in his own life: "Formerly, in the kitchen of his Sacred and Gracious Majesty, many hundreds of thousands of living creatures were slaughtered every day to make curries. But now . . . only three living creatures are slaughtered for curry, to wit, two peacocks and an antelope—the antelope, however, not invariably."

On the level of daily life, the doctrine of *ahimsa* furthered the spread of vegetarianism in India. In more general terms, this doctrine of gentleness and compassion may have affected the fortunes of the Mauryan Empire as a whole. Ashoka renounced war as an instrument of policy and taught his own soldiers that the golden rule, the precept that a man should behave toward others as he would wish them to behave toward himself, was the basic law of life. Ironically, this very idea may also have helped to destroy the great empire that Ashoka ruled so wisely and so well.

Less than 50 years after the emperor's death in

232 B.C., the Mauryan Empire fell to pieces. Ashoka's descendants quarreled over the succession; provincial governors revolted and gained independence for their regions. The Mauryan army lost its vigor and combativeness, and was no longer able to defend the empire against invasion or to control the native populations. Buddhist ideals no longer inspired government policy, and the priestly brahman class, once more advisers to kings, reasserted the old intolerance, the old belief in the separation of peoples.

For centuries afterward, Ashoka himself was almost forgotten, a subject of legend and reminiscence. Over a thousand years later, when scholars began to sift the truth behind the legends, his significance in Indian history was sometimes misunderstood. One 19th Century historian, summarizing Buddhist legends of the emperor's career, remarked that in these legends Ashoka seemed "half monster and half idiot."

Gradually, however, a new insight into the meaning of Ashoka's life and teachings came to prevail. In the 20th Century a great leader of modern India, Jawaharlal Nehru, repeatedly paid tribute to his ancient predecessor. In a letter written to his daughter while he himself was a political prisoner, Nehru set down these words:

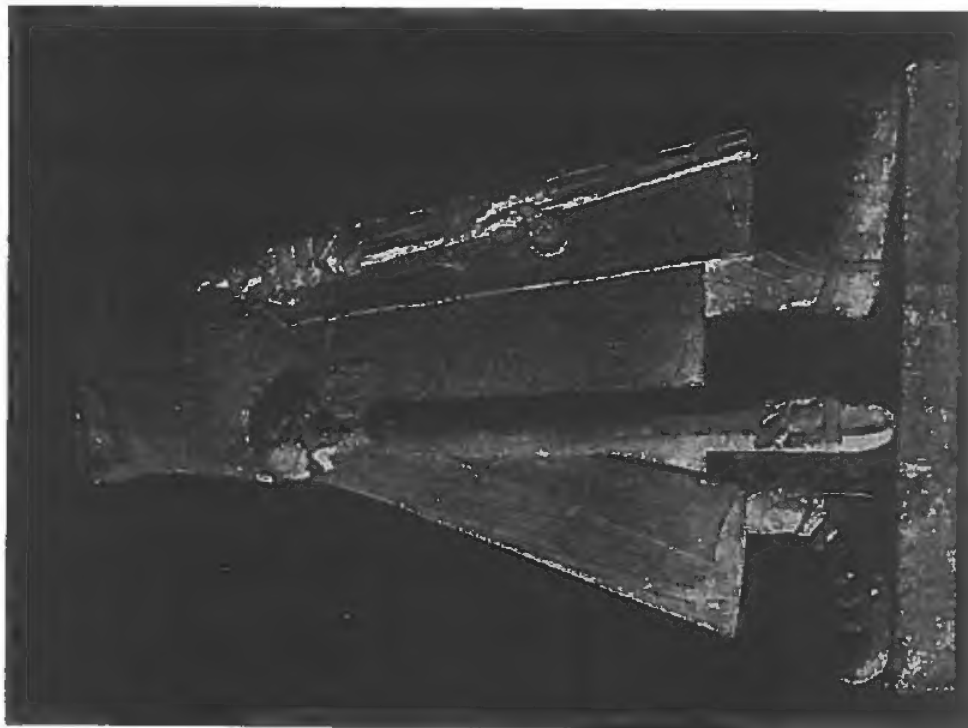
*The palace of massive stone is gone, leaving no trace behind, but the memory of Ashoka lives over the whole continent of Asia, and his edicts still speak to us in a language we can understand and appreciate. And we can still learn much from them.*

And he ended the letter with a quotation from one of Ashoka's noblest utterances:

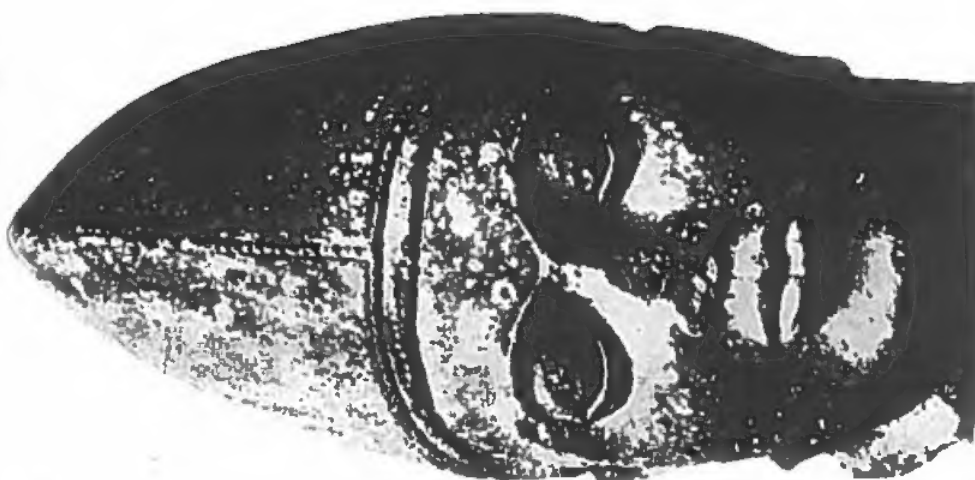
*All sects deserve reverence for one reason or another. By thus acting a man exalts his own sect and at the same time does service to the sects of other people.*

Dept. of Archaeology, Government of India

Messrs. Faber & Faber, Royal Academy, Trustees  
and Curzon Museum, Mathurā



Headless Statue of King Kanishka.  
Mathurā. 1st-2nd century A.D.



Head of Kushāna King. Mathurā



The Buddha Preach



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